

How ATS schools are responding to COVID-19 crisis

By DEBORAH H. C. GIN

Two weeks ago, ATS conducted a brief survey of member schools' responses to the COVID-19 crisis. We surveyed CEOs and CAOs, with 86% of all 275 schools responding—the highest response rate ever for any recent ATS survey. The broad participation is indicative of both the goodwill of schools—contributing to the whole so that all may learn—and the desire to ready their own schools in the best ways possible.

The survey asked participants about the challenges their schools are facing, how they are addressing those challenges, lessons they have learned, and questions that remain. This article presents the survey's overall findings, and Jo Ann Deasy's [article](#)—also in this issue—shares findings related to commencement. In an upcoming special issue of *Colloquy Online*, we will feature findings



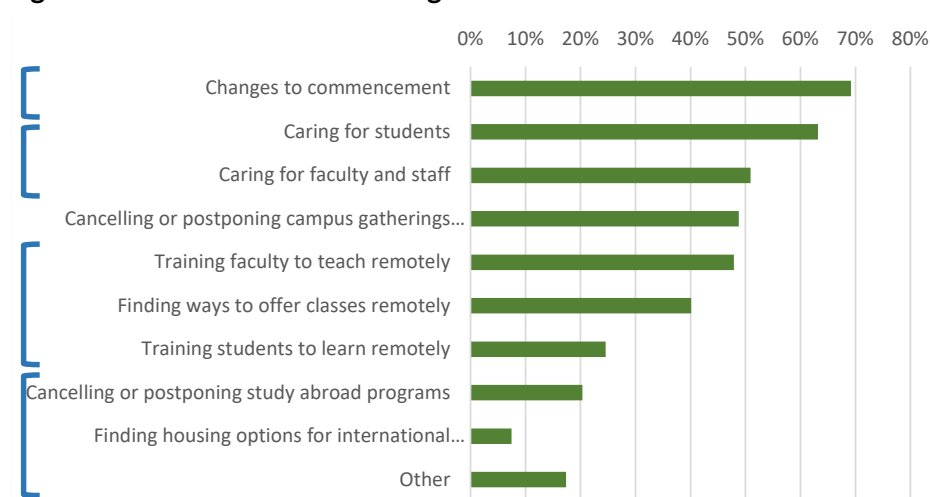
related to online teaching/learning and a preliminary view of finances from the survey.

Key finding #1—immediate challenges

Throughout April, schools were basically operating as triage centers, encountering and prioritizing the most urgent needs, and identifying emergency solutions.

From a list of ten options, survey respondents selected the most immediate challenges they're encountering in

Figure 1: Most Immediate Challenges



this crisis. Figure 1 shows the frequency of responses. Not surprisingly, "Changes to commencement" was the most commonly selected. Note also that responses were found in three other clusters: care for the community, teaching remotely, and other challenges. Within "Other," the most frequently named challenge was financial.

What did schools do to address these immediate challenges? Of 13 options, the top three were:

- Switched all courses to remote delivery
- Asked employees to work from home
- Developed training for faculty to teach online

Of the 237 schools that participated in the survey, 82 already offer at least one degree online. As expected, these schools responded differently from those that weren't already offering online degrees. The most notable difference was in the need to develop under-prepared faculty to teach online: of the schools that weren't offering online degrees, 68% said they had to develop such training in response to the crisis, whereas of schools that already offered online degrees, only 44% reported having to develop this training.

In terms of course delivery, more than half (52%) reported they are offering courses mostly synchronously via some online platform, such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. Another third (32%) said they are

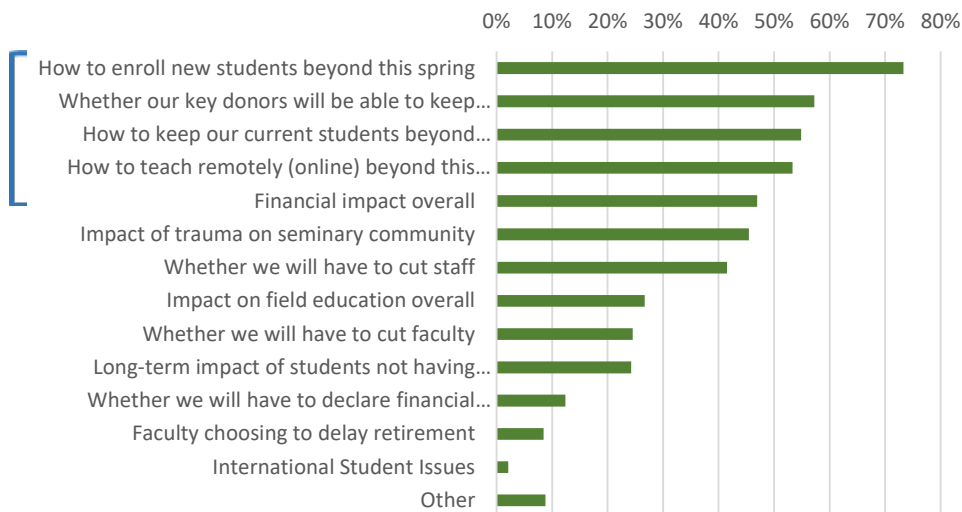
delivering courses about half synchronously via online platform and half asynchronously via an LMS, such as Canvas, Moodle, or Populi. The remainder said they're offering courses mostly asynchronously.

Key finding #2—challenges beyond the immediate

If the picture of responding to immediate challenges resembles emergency room triage, the picture of challenges beyond the immediate looks more like the ICU. Challenges that emerge in a longer-term crisis by necessity shift to questions about sustainability, quality of care, and impacts of the crisis.

For example, with the first key finding, only a couple dozen schools (7% of responses) named "financial issues" as an immediate challenge (in "Other"); this may have been higher had the option been provided. However, in Figure 2, we see that four of the top five most frequently selected options relate in some way to finances: concerns about enrollment, donor base, and overall financial impact. Schools are beginning to think about longer-term planning, which will include looking at the fall-out of emergency issues like new economic pressures caused by orders to shelter in place globally. It will also include, however, looking at conditions that existed at the school prior to the arrival of the pandemic.

Figure 2: Challenges beyond the Immediate



Looking more closely at the five most frequently selected challenges here, we see that participants responded differently, by school type. **"How to enroll new students beyond the spring semester"** was by far the top, with 72% of participants making this selection. While leaders at both Evangelical and Mainline schools marked this challenge slightly more frequently than average, leaders at Roman Catholic or Orthodox schools were less likely (62%) to mark this as a challenge, largely due to the unique enrollment system and processes in Roman Catholic or Orthodox schools, which free more of their leaders to attend to other challenges.

More than half (56%) of participants saw **"whether key donors will be able to keep supporting the school"** as a

challenge. Comparisons by type of school did not reveal many differences except for whether the school is related to another

entity. A greater proportion of leaders at stand-alone schools (61%) noted this as a challenge. This may reflect the differentiated reality for related schools—that most can rely on fundraising resources beyond their particular theological school units.

In terms of **"how to keep current students beyond the spring semester,"** about half (54%) of all participants named this as a challenge beyond the immediate. However, for this challenge, several aspects of the schools were salient. Participants from the following school types were far more likely to see this as a challenge:

- Related schools (72%)
- Evangelical schools (61%)
- Independent (not denominationally affiliated) schools (61%)
- Largest schools (68%)
- Schools from the Southeast (64%) and Western regions (71%) of the continent

Various reasons may be contributing to this differentiation, including enrollment dependence, not having strong ties to feeder denominations, and being located in areas that have been hard hit by the pandemic or rely heavily on international students.

Just under half (46%) of all participants thought the **"financial impact on the school or the broader ecology of ministry"** is a challenge. As with other issues, differences were found based on schools' ecclesial families. Those from Mainline schools were more likely (57%) to consider this a challenge, while those from Roman Catholic or Orthodox schools were less likely (23%), presumably because of the special funding structure that exists for the latter. Interestingly, tenure in the role was also

particularly salient here: those who have been in the role less than a year were far less likely (38%) than those

who have been in the role 11 years or more (61%) to see this as a challenge beyond the immediate. This may be indicative of the steep learning curve that new leaders are encountering during this unprecedented crisis, as well as the "long view" that veteran leaders have cultivated through years of experience.

Finally, as expected, **"how to teach remotely beyond the spring semester"**—selected by just over half (53%) of all respondents—was found to be not as prevalent of an issue for schools who already offer degrees online (34%) than for schools who don't as of yet (62%).

Though plans to offer all courses online may not be the most accurate indicator of how schools are addressing challenges beyond the immediate, survey findings show a large gap between plans for summer and plans for fall. While 74% of respondents said they have plans to offer all courses online in the summer (with another 13% seriously considering, as of mid-April), only 23% said they

had such plans for fall (with another 42% seriously considering). It is likely that, as COVID-related news changes daily, schools are reluctant or unable to make plans too far in advance. That said, if exclusively remote learning continues into the fall and beyond—assuming they have not already done so—schools will soon need to consider how they will offer robust online curricula, based on sound pedagogical principles and beyond the emergency-triage form of remote delivery of the spring semester.

Managing this pandemic has clearly brought educational questions (about pedagogy and delivery) and financial questions (about enrollment and sustainability) together. Addressing concerns about enrollment will require attention to quality of delivery, and considerations about educational mission will require thought to cost and personnel structure.

If they have not already, schools will soon be transitioning from the ER to the ICU, then on to long-term care and decisions. Just as getting out of the ICU requires good information, sustained training, and physical therapy, schools will need good information, training with a long view, and resources for trauma care. Our hope is that schools will find these both from one another through spaces like [Engage ATS](#) and from resources produced by ATS staff and partners. May we not just get through this crisis, but become healthier schools and a healthier association as a result.

(The Association's research team is working on resources to help schools as they attend to immediate, intermediate, and long-term issues related to COVID-19. Most immediately, look for additional Colloquy Online articles from the present survey and a follow-up survey on finances.)



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